

A call that could change history

Trump-Pezeshkian's moment to forge peace



By Seyed Hossein Mousavian
International affairs analyst

OPINION

The incoming Trump administration has expressed support for a negotiated solution with Iran on all outstanding issues. When asked about a message to the Leader of Iran's Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, President-elect Trump simply said, "I wish him luck." During his 2024 presidential campaign, Trump indicated that his Iran policy in the second term would be "very different" than that in his first. He rejected the "regime change" policy and reiterated that he wants Iran to be successful, but also that he opposes the country's acquisition of nuclear weapons. In September 2024, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian stated that Tehran is ready for "constructive" dialogue, "ready to engage" with the West about nuclear power, and has expressed willingness to improve relations with the US.

Nevertheless, the gaps between Washington and Tehran will be difficult to bridge. If Trump wishes to break the deadlock by negotiating with Iran, he will face fierce opposition within the US, in Iran, and in the region.

If Trump's main objective is to ensure that Iran does not acquire a nuclear bomb, however, he needs a plan that would permanently block the acquisition of nuclear bombs not only by Iran but also by other ambitious countries in the region. As President Biden warned, "If Iran gets the bomb, then Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt will follow."

Here are the elements of such a plan:

First, as in the Obama administration's Iran nuclear deal, Iran would agree to complete transparency of its nuclear programs and the most stringent level of International Atomic Energy Agency verification measures.

Second, the key principles of the agreement would be that it applies to all the countries in the region, making it possible to make permanent the main non-proliferation limitations of the deal, including limiting uranium enrichment to below 5 percent and no separation of plutonium from spent fuel.

Third, following the implementation of a new nuclear deal, Washington and Tehran would need to engage in discussions about regional security. Both countries should temporarily suspend all threats and hostilities as a first step and goodwill gesture.

Some years ago, Robert Einhorn, then a US nuclear negotiator told me that "when we raise the necessity of regional talks, some Iranians mistakenly believe that we mean the dismantling of Iran's missile and defense capabilities. All



Then-US president Donald Trump hangs up following a phone conversation in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, D.C., US, on August 27, 2018. The inauguration of Trump as the US president for the second time takes place today.

AL DRAGO/BLOOMBERG

countries including Iran have the right to the defense capabilities they need. We understand that Iran, like us, has its own security concerns. Both sides must therefore engage in a serious and fair dialogue to address each other's legitimate and lawful concerns and find a balanced solution." Ayatollah Khamenei is the ultimate decision-maker regarding Iran's relations with the United

States. On January 8, 2024, he said that the US is fundamentally hostile to the Iranian nation and the Islamic Republic, wishing for the destruction of Iran. Based on the several decades of understanding I have of his views, I believe that the essence of his concerns regarding the relations with the US can be summarized in three key points: the threat to Iran's independence through interference in internal affairs, the "regime change" policy, and the lack of respect for and recognition of Iran's national interests. On the other side, during 15 years of research at Princeton University on US-Iran relations, I believe that "challenging and threatening the US interests

in the region" is the most important concern the US has regarding Iran's policies after the 1979 revolution.

If there is going to be a fair and balanced deal, both capitals should acknowledge each other's legitimate regional interests and commit to not threatening those interests. This would require some realignment of their regional security and diplomacy strategies, especially with their key allies.

Moreover, it would require a credible and sustainable model for regional stability and peace. Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf Cooperation Council countries in the Persian Gulf could achieve such an arrangement through a new col-

lective security and economic framework modeled on the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

The arrangement would facilitate establishing balanced and normal relations with the Western and Eastern blocs; regional arms control arrangements including a nuclear weapons-free zone; and the reduction of US military forces and expenditures in the region. The agreement could also link a cessation of military conflict between Iran and Israel with a just and durable solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as required by multiple UN resolutions.

Finally, the deal could also include significant economic

cooperation between the US and Iran, potentially involving projects worth hundreds of billions of dollars in sectors such as petrochemicals, aviation, and clean energy. This would create major economic stakes in the agreement within both countries, making the new arrangements more robust.

On his first day in office at the White House, President Trump could agree in a phone conversation with his Iranian counterpart, President Pezeshkian, to have special envoys from both countries quickly initiate direct talks for such a fair, sustainable, and historic agreement.

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Workers build a stage in the US Capitol Rotunda in Washington on January 17, 2025, for the 60th presidential inauguration, which was moved indoors.

MORRY GASH/AP



US president-elect Donald Trump (front-L) takes the oath of office during the 58th presidential inauguration in Washington, D.C., US, on January 20, 2017. He takes the oath for the second time today.

ANDREW HARRER/BLOOMBERG